United Nations A/54/64

General Assembly

Distr.: General
12 February 1999

Original: English

Fifty-fourth session
General and complete disarmament

Note verbale dated 11 February 1999 from the Permanent Mission of South Africa to the United Nations addressed to the Secretary-General

The Permanent Mission of South Africa to the United Nations has the honour to request that South Africa's input in pursuance of the decision (CM/Dec. 432 (LXVIII)) on the proliferation of small arms and light weapons taken at the thirty-fourth meeting of Heads of State of the Organization of African Unity (see annex) be circulated as a document of the General Assembly under the item entitled "General and complete disarmament".

99-03746 (E) 180299

Annex

South African input in pursuance of the decision (CM/Dec. 432 (LXVIII)) on the proliferation of small arms and light weapons taken at the thirty-fourth meeting of Heads of State of the Organization of African Unity

South Africa recognises the primary role of the Organization of African Unity in efforts to curtail the proliferation of small arms and light weapons in all its aspects in accordance with the OAU decision CM/Dec. 432 (LXVIII). Pursuant to paragraph 4 of this decision the South African position on small arms and light weapons proliferation as well as steps taken to deal with the issue is appended below.

SOUTH AFRICAN POSITION ON SMALL ARMS AND LIGHT WEAPONS PROLIFERATION

While arms control has traditionally focused on conventional arms and weapons of mass destruction, the devastation wrought by the proliferation of light weapons and small arms on socio-economic development generally, and specifically in the reconstruction of post-conflict societies, can no longer be ignored.

Within countries, unimpeded access to light weapons and small arms, and the use of these, have increased the lethality of crime, violence, banditry and civil disobedience. Regionally, the demobilisation of ex-combatants, disarmament programmes and reductions of military-industrial complexes are constrained by the existence of large amounts of poorly regulated and indiscriminately used light weapons and small arms.

The diffusion of existing stocks and the import of new weapons endanger the democratic pursuits which are being consolidated and negatively influence the ability of governments to govern effectively, not only of countries in Africa but around the world.

The challenge in addressing the proliferation of small arms is to marshal the necessary human and financial resources, encourage the sharing of reliable data among national departments and regional partners, coordinate action and raise the profile of the issue to gain the support of governments, politicians and nongovernmental organisations.

Furthermore, the illicit proliferation of small arms is closely linked to other criminal activities and therefore must be addressed within the context of other initiatives aimed at reducing crime. The close link between licit and illicit weapons must also be recognised and approaches to addressing the one must relate to the other both within countries and in regional initiatives.

Therefore, South Africa believes that:

A holistic approach is necessary to address this problem.

Concurrent action must be taken at national, regional and international levels focusing both on licit and illicit small arms and light weapons; and

A regional initiative for the control of weapons proliferation in Africa is urgently needed.

Recommended course of action :

Approach :

Addressing the proliferation of light weapons and small arms in Africa must be viewed from an inclusive perspective of arms control and disarmament, post-conflict peace building, conflict prevention and socio-economic development.

Through the coordination of these approaches, a holistic national strategy should be developed that will assess and identify national priorities and determine achievable steps to be taken to contain and reduce weapons proliferation.

To reinforce national action, it is imperative that a regional approach should be formulated to address the problem of the uncontrolled proliferation of small arms and light weapons that is based on regional concerns and adopts an incremental approach. This will ensure that as each region of the world develops an indigenous approach, the building blocks will be put in place to effectively deal with this issue globally.

The focus areas in all instances should be placed on illicit and licit small arms and light weapons. Thus, national and regional approaches must be developed for both short-term and long-term gains which can make an impact on illicit as well as licit arms circulation.

Practical measures for co-ordination and co-operation :
National :

National efforts should focus on enhancing legislation and regulation to prevent legal small arms from becoming illegal through criminal activity, improve, as necessary, regulation on the import, export and transfer of light weapons and small arms, and increase the control over stocks of light weapons belonging to security forces.

Steps should also be taken to reduce the number of existing weapons through voluntary methods (including programmes of collection and destruction) and increasing the capacity of the security forces to identify, seize and destroy illicit weapons.

Regional:

Regionally, an important confidence-building measure which will lead to long-term gains for regional cooperation and trust is

greater transparency by countries of their transfers of small arms and light weapons.

In affected regions, countries and regional organisations should take immediate steps to stop the inflow of small arms and light weapons through increased cooperation, harmonisation of transfer procedures, tighter border control and intelligence sharing. Attention must also be focused on the recirculation of existing stocks throughout the region and appropriate control measures devised, including increased cooperation among governments regionally, joint operations and harmonisation of priorities.

A cooperative partnership should be established between governments, international and regional organisations and the nongovernmental community to mobilise public and political support. The role of the nongovernmental community in assisting governments in achieving this support and aiding in the compilation of reliable data regarding small arms and light weapons proliferation in all its aspects should be explored fully.

Aside from this regional initiative, an international conference on light weapons and small arms should be held after 1999 to enable governments and regional organisations to share their experiences, and facilitate dialogue. The aim of the conference should be to increase cooperation and avoid duplication of initiatives to ensure that scarce resources are utilised effectively. The conference should formulate an action plan to combat this proliferation problem based upon the experiences of indigenous regional approaches in this regard. Such regional approaches will have put in place measures to effectively deal with this issue globally.

SCOPE OF THE PROBLEM OF THE PROLIFERATION OF SMALL ARMS AND LIGHT WEAPONS IN SOUTH AFRICA

In dealing with the scope of small arms proliferation it must be realized that the proliferation consists of two different groups, namely illegal or illicit small arms and the legal proliferation. Both contribute to the problems of proliferation.

Legal Arms

The proliferation of legal arms continues unabated in South Africa. The main cause being the high level of violent crime resulting in people purchasing arms for self-defence purposes. Statistically South Africa has one of the highest ratios of handguns in the world. Currently there are some 4,2 million arms registered in some 2,3 million persons' names. Of these 1,2 million are rifles, 0,4 million shotguns and 2,6 million handguns. Applications for licences to possess arms are still being received at an average rate of 20 000 per month.

What is most disconcerting is the fact that arms in legal

possession are being stolen or robbed at a rate of 20 000 per year. The recovery of stolen or robbed arms is less than this rate being 14 970 for 1997.

Illegal Arms

The flow of illegal arms continues into South Africa mainly across our borders with neighbouring states such as Mozambique. Although it is believed that as a source for the criminal element in South Africa this source is not as important as those arms stolen from private individuals.

STEPS TAKEN TO DEAL WITH THE SMALL ARMS PROLIFERATION PROBLEM

The South African Government has declared the combating of small arms (firearms) proliferation as a South African Police Service priority number one for 1998/99. A coherent strategy to deal with the proliferation of small arms in South Africa has been developed. The strategy represents an integral and holistic approach to introduce stricter control measures and to eventually remove the causal factors of small arms proliferation. In this regard the National Firearms Plan is being implemented which mainly deals with the problem of illegal small arms. The objective is to reduce the number of illegal small arms in circulation as well as to reduce the flow of illegal weapons into South Africa. It also concentrates efforts to ensure the lawful and proper use of licensed firearms.

The Overall Strategy has four basic aims:

1. To stop the inflow of illegal arms into South Africa.
2. To prevent arms in legal possession becoming illegal through theft and robbery.
3. To mop up the existing pool of arms in South Africa.
4. To educate South Africans concerning the possession of arms.

Under each of these four main aims there are a number of projects one of the more important ones being the legislative amendments which are aimed at tightening up the issuing of licences and ensuring that fewer losses occur from legal owners.

In addition, South Africa is committed to a policy of responsibility and accountability in the trade and transfer of all arms. South Africa has established an arms control system which makes provision for a ministerial control body, criteria, principles and guidelines to ensure the responsible transfer and trade in, amongst others, small arms and light weapons.

The South African Government has adopted a policy on the destruction of surplus small arms where appropriate. On 6 October 1997 the South African Police Service melted down 20 tons of firearms. A total of 4 504 confiscated firearms, including pistols, revolvers, rifles, shotguns and home made firearms. The commercial value of these arms is estimated to be in excess of

R2 million (approx US$264 000). Subsequently the South African Police Service has destroyed an additional 11 tons of confiscated ammunition and 10 tons of confiscated small arms, 9 tons of obsolete/outdated ammunition and 20 tons of redundant/obsolete small arms.

The following are steps being taken by the South African Police Service (SAPS) to address the problem :

* Tri-lateral meetings with Swaziland and Mozambique in order to exchange information and come up with joint initiatives.
* Joint Monitoring Operations with Swaziland and Mozambique concentrating on the border posts and border areas.
* Training / Briefing of members of Border Police / Dog Units.
* Training of Mozambique Policemen and Parks Border Officials in order to combat the problem.
* New Curriculum for Illegal Firearm Investigation Course.
* Drawing up a new mandate / working procedure which is awaiting final approval.
* Training of members to etch serial numbers of firearms.
* Participation in the Institute for Security Studies Programmes in order to analyse the illegal firearms situation.
* Initiatives were taken to ensure that the issuing of export permits was centralised by the Central Firearms Register.
* Suggestions to Central Firearms Register that they adhere to the export procedures as proposed by the United Nations.

A specialized unit has been established by SAPS to address the following:

* illegal possession of firearms and explosives;
* illegal importing and distribution of firearms and explosives;
* illegal domestic manufacturing of firearms and explosives;
* illegal export of firearms and explosives;
* illegal use of firearms and explosives;
* dealing in firearms and explosives; and
* origin of illegal firearms and explosive devices.

South Africa is further committed to stopping the flow of illegal small arms across its borders. South Africa has already entered into agreements with several Southern African States with a view to curb the trafficking of illegal small arms and ammunition. In this regard bi-lateral agreements have been signed between South Africa and Mozambique and between South Africa and Swaziland to address cross border crime. This agreement led to the launching of the first joint operation for the mapping and destruction of uncontrolled arms/explosives caches within Mozambique, known as Operation Rachel. Four official Rachel operations have been held within Mozambique since 1995, to locate and destroy uncontrolled arms and explosive caches in Mozambique. Huge successes have been achieved in which tons of arms and explosives have been destroyed.

Approximately 60 successful ad hoc ground level joint operations have been held between Mozambique and South Africa with the same purpose. In addition, several joint operations have been held since then at both grass roots and national level, between the three countries. This agreement also makes provision for the following:

* Joint investigations.
* Joint interrogation of suspects.
* Joint exchange of information.

The cost of all these operations has been carried by the South African Government.

A new multi-lateral agreement was also signed in 1997 under the umbrella of SARPCCO, with eleven different SADC countries. This agreement is basically the same content as the bi-lateral agreements with Mozambique and Swaziland. This agreement, however, still needs ratification by some of the countries' governments.

The issuing of all export permits for commercial firearms has been centralized in a bid to verify all exports prior to dispatch.

INTERNATIONAL INITIATIVES BY SOUTH AFRICA

In the international fora the South African Government is insisting that equal attention should be given to the control of the proliferation of conventional weapons as is given to the disarmament debate on weapons of mass destruction.

During the 1998 session of the General Assembly of the United Nations South Africa initiated a UN resolution on the illicit trafficking in small arms, which was adopted without a vote. The objective of this resolution is to empower the UN Secretary General to undertake regional consultations on the issue of small arms proliferation.

South Africa is also cooperating with the various United Nations initiatives on small arms. In this regard and in cooperation with the UN Panel of Governmental Experts on Small Arms and the Government of Japan, the South African Government hosted a regional Workshop on Small Arms Proliferation which was held in Pretoria, South Africa, from 23 to 25 September 1996.

The objective of the Workshop was to provide the members of the UN Panel of Governmental Experts on Small Arms with additional insights and information on: the types of small arms and light weapons in the region; the causes and modes for their accumulation and transfer; and the practical measures for stemming their flow, proliferation and use. This Panel was

established by the Secretary General of the United Nations in pursuance of General Assembly Resolution 50/70B. The report of the Panel (A/52/298 of 27 August 1997) was submitted to the 52nd session of the United Nations General Assembly in 1997. Participants from the following countries were present at the Workshop: Mozambique, Namibia, South Africa, Swaziland, Zimbabwe, Sierra Leone, Somalia, as well as representatives of United Nations International Commission of Inquiry: Rwanda, United Nations Sahara-Sahel Mission, Japan, Mali, Belgium, Germany, Finland and the United States of America.
The participants voiced their shared concern over the following consequences of the proliferation of small arms:

- The uncontrolled proliferation of small arms has a devastating effect on the socio-economic development and reconstruction of civil societies in Africa. Such a proliferation endangers the democratic pursuits which are being consolidated at the time in the region.

- Crime, violence and lawlessness are inextricably bound to the availability of light weapons and small arms.

- Efforts at regional demilitarization, demobilization and disarmament, which should be the result of regional peace, are severely constrained by the continuing existence and indiscriminate use of small arms and light weapons.

Participants agreed that the problem needs to be addressed in a holistic manner and dealt with concurrently at domestic, regional and international levels.